

## **MAPC Technical Assistance Request –Acton Multifamily Zoning for MBTA Communities Town of Acton**

### **Municipality and Contact**

The Town of Acton respectfully requests technical assistance with implementing a public process to explore and analyze zoning compliance with the new multifamily zoning requirement for MBTA communities (section 3A of MGL Chapter 40A). Kristen Guichard, will be the Town project manager, she can be reached at [kguichard@actonma.gov](mailto:kguichard@actonma.gov) or 978-929-6631.

### **Project Description and Context**

The Town of Acton intends to apply for a One Stop grant to support this work; the application opens on May 2, 2022 (and closes on June 3, 2022). To be eligible for state grants via the One Stop application, MBTA communities like Acton must do the following by that date: include a presentation of the draft guidelines in a meeting of the Select Board, complete and submit the MBTA Community Information Form.

To date, Kristen Guichard, Planning Director/Zoning Enforcement Officer has prepared a memo for the Select Board that covers the zoning requirement and how the Town's zoning compares. The Select Board plans to discuss this topic at a meeting on March 21. That discussion and public comment at that meeting will inform the Town's comments to the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) on the draft guidance. The Town is also working to complete the required MBTA Community Information Form, which, among other things, asks what kind of technical assistance, if any, the Town will need to comply with section 3A.

The Town is eager to begin a public outreach process to explore compliance with section 3A in the short term, prior to when One Stop grants will be awarded, and is seeking technical assistance and funding from MAPC to do so. Acton is classified as a commuter rail community and zoning compliance requires focus on the South Acton transit station on the Fitchburg Line. Work will entail a robust public outreach effort and technical analysis to understand what zoning compliance with section 3A would look like for the Town.

### **TASK 1: PROJECT START-UP**

Project start-up would include a review of local materials relevant to the rezoning analysis, including the memo to the Select Board, public comments, and other relevant materials provided by the Town. Key findings will be included in a memo to the Town. The Town would provide a virtual and in person tour of the station area to MAPC project team. The Town will provide any key maps or development site plans within the area.

The Town will create an Advisory Committee (AC) to work with MAPC. The Advisory Committee that will serve as a strategizing entity to move the public process forward and will be made up of representatives from local Boards, Committees and staff. The project team will meet remotely with the AC to go over the project scope and timelines and the AC role.

Communications Program:

- Community Outreach + Communications

The AC will work with MAPC to create a communications strategy that includes newsletters and list serves to invite members of the public to outreach events. The project would also include the creation of a webpage to share content, and materials pertaining to the project which the public can visit for news and updates.

**Task 1 Outreach –Understanding Community Needs:**

- **Focus Groups:** The Town and MAPC will work to identify invitees for remote focus group meetings including those working on housing and sustainability efforts in town and those with unmet housing needs. Discussion will focus on housing needs, including equity and inclusion strategies. The Town will also identify relevant Town staff, volunteers, and board/committee members whose work intersects with zoning, permitting, and development to invite to a second remote focus group.
- **Survey:** A general survey will be conducted to gather feedback from the community about unmet housing needs and potential strategies to enhance housing and sustainability.

**TASK 2: ZONING ANALYSIS**

- **Draft study area boundary** Analysis of current zoning and environmental constraints will be mapped and used to draw a working study area boundary that can meet the section 3A minimum of 50 acres within a 0.5-mile and 1-mile radius of the transit station and commuter parking. This work will consider wetlands, land subject to use restrictions, and other environmental constraints relevant to development and section 3A's definition of “developable land.” The Town will review the draft boundary and review it with the AC group.
- **Analysis of current zoning** through a zoning audit of the station area by reviewing relevant portions of the Town's Zoning Bylaw. The focus will be on understanding districts in the area, allowed and disallowed residential uses, dimensional regulations, and other requirements. The project would also assess the permitting process, including what is allowed as of right and what requires a special permit or variance and how long it takes. The intent of the analysis is to provide the foundation for future tasks pertaining to understanding section 3A compliance.

**Task 2 Outreach – Understanding Regulatory Frameworks and Development Constraints:**

- The Town and MAPC will work to identify developers active in Acton and those experienced with the types of residential development likely under section 3A to invite to a focus group. Discussion should focus on experiences with and barriers and opportunities to developing in Acton or within similar regulatory frameworks, as well as priorities for zoning under section 3A. For example, the community may identify desires for specific design standards or processes; the Town would like to make sure they could be achieved and that all aspects of development are being evaluated.
- **Outreach – Town-wide engagement activity:**  
MAPC will design and host, with the support of the Town, a webinar or Zoom meeting to educate the public on the zoning requirement and Acton's current zoning. The event will include exercises pertaining to visioning for the station area and establishing goals and priorities for the new zoning.

Analysis of development trends:

- The Town will provide local permitting, zoning relief, and other data on recent multifamily development for MAPC to analyze and draw conclusions about development trends. The goal is to inform future project tasks related to developing zoning recommendations and testing compliance with section 3A.

### **TASK 3: VISIONING**

Study area vision:

- Together with the AC, MAPC will draft a vision for the study area based on past community plans' goals, and community input collected as part of this project, as it relates to the objectives of section 3A. The draft statement will be shared with the Town for feedback and then with the AC; edits will be made as needed early on in the process.

Development typologies:

- To help the public understand development types and density, MAPC will utilize its library of housing icons. In consultation with the Town, MAPC will select appropriate development types based on zoning objectives and requirements. These icons may be paired with photographs of real-world development in Acton or similar communities if deemed useful. This work will be used for engagement purposes to help people understand how buildings reflect zoning requirements.

Infrastructural constraints:

- Based on recent plans, studies, and local data, MAPC will assess infrastructural constraints in the study area, including water, sewer, and roadways, to understand "developable land" as defined by the guidance and determine to what extent each may be a barrier to new development and redevelopment. Significant limitations identified may require preliminary research on best practices and suitable solutions the Town can implement in order to unlock development.

Task 3 Outreach:

- MAPC will design and host, with the support of the Town and the AC, a webinar or Zoom meeting to share findings from Tasks 3 and 4 and collect input on development types.

### **TASK 4: COMPLIANCE**

MAPC will use the zoning audit conducted under Task 2 to determine where the current zoning is and is not in alignment with the requirements of section 3A. Analysis will focus on the elements of the state guidance, including by-right development, multifamily housing types, minimum density, housing suitability for families, dimensional regulations that will affect unit capacity, and others.

Zoning and design recommendations:

- Based on analyses conducted to date and community input on the vision for the station area, MAPC will develop zoning and design recommendations that can be used to test unit capacity. For any given zoning element, such as density and dimensional regulations, several options may be recommended to test for compliance with section 3A and the degree to which they can advance the community's vision for the station area. These recommendations will be revised based on how they impact unit capacity. Depending on findings from this work to date, supplemental recommendations for design guidelines may be provided (but design guidelines are not a deliverable of this project).

#### Parcel analysis:

A parcel analysis of the study area, including variables such as parcel size, topography, ownership, adjacencies, existing development, current assessed building value, water and sewer access, and other variables. This work will help confirm the study area boundary and inform the unit capacity modeling.

#### Unit capacity modeling:

- Using MAPC's tool developed to test the impact of different zoning scenarios, a buildout capacity would be conducted within a geography to determine to what degree the zoning recommendations comply with section 3A. The findings from this analysis will be shared with the Town and used to select the preferred zoning scenario.

#### Final Summary:

- A final summer memo would be provided that includes the Section 3A comparison, zoning recommendations based on public feedback, parcel analysis findings, and unit capacity overview.

#### Outreach:

- A final virtual public forum will be held to present findings.